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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to assess the state of the art of parent involvement research and to discuss the accomplishments of and the challenges before the field. Instead of presenting a comprehensive review of the literature, this essay uses examples from empirical research and qualitative investigations to fortify the perspectives presented. The discussion of specific research lessons and problems is preceded by a brief review of the context for parent involvement research. Then, four "legacies" of previous efforts to bring together parents and schools, legacies with implications for parent involvement, are discussed: (1) separation; (2) disequilibrium; (3) ambiguity; and (4) individuality. The relationship of each legacy to parent involvement research is also discussed. Particular attention is given to studies about the process, models, and effects of parent involvement. Effects are reported that concern the areas of cognitive and non-cognitive development, school programs and the climate for learning, parents, teachers, and the community. Concluding comments focus on methodological issues and implications for educational practice and policy formation. (RH)

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PARENT INVOLVEMENT RESEARCH: A FIELD IN SEARCH OF ITSELF

by

Sharon L. Kagan

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The purpose of this essay is to assess the state of the art of parent involvement research, and to discuss the accomplishments of and the challenges before the field. Instead of presenting a comprehensive review of the literature, this essay uses examples from empirical research and qualitative investigations to fortify the perspectives presented.

In considering the state of the research on parent involvement, the story of Debbie, a six year old youngster comes to mind. Debbie's parents, concerned about her poor performance in school, brought her to a psychologist for testing. In the course of a routine examination, the psychologist asked Debbie, "How many weeks are there in a year?" Debbie, without the frustration, hesitation or difficulty she had demonstrated on other items, promptly said "52." The examiner, curious about Debbie's rapid response, then asked her how she arrived at her answer so quickly. She replied perkily, "Oh it was easy . . . I know that there are 30 days in a month and 12 months in a year and so I added 30 + 12 and got 52!" Debbie's response is strikingly similar to the condition of parent involvement research today. Somehow, those who have studied parent involvement have gotten some terrific answers. They demonstrate that parent involvement can make a difference -- but they also realize that the way parent involvement research has evolved has not been efficient, and like Debbie's examiner, they see that correct answers have camouflaged some very difficult and persistent problems.

Before turning to a discussion of specific research lessons and problems, I'd like to review briefly the context in which parent involvment research has been set.

Historical Context for Parent-School Relations

When this country was conceived, democratic theory emphasized individual participation and espoused individual, unmediated involvement in government. But, as American society became more complex, ideals of democracy were revised so that traditional democratic theory, with its emphasis on individual participation, gave way to more representative democracy -- a democracy where a more knowledgeable elite represented the public in critical decisions.

This change from classical to representative democracy was reflected in the practice of schooling in America. Initially, parents were the primary

educators and the family the primary place of learning. With the growth of technology and bureaucracy, parents became less directly involved in education, delegating representatives, in this case, teachers. However, as in the body politic, the use of representatives did not silence individual authority or involvement. In schools, in loco parentis statutes helped to preserve the role of parents as the ultimate authority in forming school policy (Fantini, 1980).

In spite of democratic intents and legal statutes, the history of parent-school relations has not proceeded peacefully. From Colonial times, families and schools have had different roles. Schools were charged with instruction in the basics -- reading, writing and arithmetic -- while families were the primary educators for moral and social development. Cremin (1977) substantiates this disparity in roles, noting further that the family-school partnership was not equal, with schools having only marginal influence. Education, as distinct from schooling, remained the responsibility of the family and church until after the American Revolution when schools became institutionalized. Later, in the mid-nineteenth century, industrialization and urbanization further separated families from schools, both psychologically and physically. Attempting to unite divergent populations, including many new immigrants, schools pursued a quest for order, manifest in compulsory attendance and regulated curricula. What few personal ties existed between families and schools were eroded as schools became more bureaucratic.

In 1890, organizational responses to the clash between families and schools emerged in the form of family/school associations. Dominated by women (municipal reformers as they were called) interested in extending their influence beyond the home to the community, these new organizations fostered a second era of school reform (Reese, 1978). Although their rhetoric (e.g., the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world) was stronger than the reality of their accomplishments, these reformers were instrumental in establishing kindergartens, playgrounds, domestic science studies, and even school gardens.

This overview points out that during their long history, parent-school collaborations have led to some school reforms. But, like the collaborations themselves, these reforms were neither universal nor easily accomplished. Instead, they were instituted arduously, district by district. This review also suggests that those involved in school reform were largely middle-class and well-educated volunteers. However, as Ira

Gordon (1979) points out, there is also a tradition of low-income families pressing for school reform. This tradition was most evident in the 1960's when, backed by Federal mandate, families worked within the bureaucracy, trying to reform it as in the case of Title I of ESEA. Parents also worked outside the bureaucracy, confronting it as in the Community Control movement. The press for school reform was a difficult one -- waged on many fronts, in many locales -- and this struggle persists today.

Decades of efforts to bring parents and schools together have left legacies for contemporary schools. Four, in particular, have implications for parent involvement. The legacies, each related to a different kind of parent involvement research, are: 1) separation, 2) disequilibrium, 3) ambiguity, and 4) individuality. In the following sections, each of the four legacies, and its relationship to parent involvement research will be discussed.

The Four Legacies

First, the legacy of separation. While designed to serve communities, American schools began and have remained at arms length from families. Engaged in complementary tasks of educating and socializing youth, schools and families are not, never were, and never will be isomorphic. Scholars (Lightfoot, 1978; Litwak and Meyer, 1973), have pointed out important differences in the function and structure of families and schools.

Because families and schools are two separate and discrete entities, it is not surprising that much of the research, particularly the early research, has tried to clarify determinants of successful parent-school interaction. In this body of "process" research, much emphasis was placed on understanding how to accelerate parent involvement. This research looked at specific characteristics of teachers who promoted parent involvement, or at specific characteristics of parents involved in school issues. Underlying this line of inquiry was an assumption that parent involvement was valuable and important, not just because of altruistic ideas about democracy, but because parent involvement would bridge the gap between families and schools.

The second legacy, disequilibrium, produced another kind of research. While pursuing equity, American schools have maintained disproportionate

power in their relationships with families, especially low-income families. Schools have maintained the power and have been slow to change, resisting support not only from families, but from educational consultants and advisors. Lightfoot (1978) points out the impervious nature of schools by indicating that family-school collaboration is usually a one-way accommodation -- that of families acquiescing to schools. Plumbing this imbalance -- this resistance to change -- led to a second line of research, one that prompted the construction of models that described and predicted the change process. Based on schools with innovative parent involvement programs, these models sought to portray the ways in which parents became partners in their children's education. Some classified parent activities by the intentions of program planners, while others described stages of parent involvement.

Distinct from the process research cited earlier which correlated specific variables with specific outcomes, the models literature took a more holistic approach and fully described the parent-school relationship. Its intent was to chronicle the full process, not to tease out particular variables.

The third legacy is perhaps the most important. It is the legacy of ambiguity -- ambiguity in the very intent of parent involvement. Although it has been discussed for decades, there is still no agreement on why parent involvement matters. This paper, along with others, has suggested that part of the rationale for parent involvement is rooted in democratic ideology. Equally strong is the belief that parent involvement can make a difference not only for children, but for schools, for parents, for teachers and for communities. Precisely because there has been so much ambiguity about the exact goals of parent involvement, its practice is variegated and includes a range of activities from parents helping their children with homework, to families maintaining a role in administrative functions such as hiring and firing of staff, and budget decisions.

The consequence of such varied goals and practices is that there is a wide range of differing effects to study and to measure. Scholars have looked at the impact of participation on children's cognitive performance and social behavior, on parents' employability, and their sense of satisfaction with themselves. Effects of parent involvement have also been correlated with changes in school climate and administrators' style. The point is that there are multiple perspectives from which studies on the "effects" of parent involvement must be considered.

Fourth is the legacy of individuality. Each American school is unique and because of its unique history, customs and regularities, each has responded differently to parents. Parent involvement differs dramatically in amount and in activity from area to area, from school to school. How investigations of parent involvement are handled, particularly when schools differ so, raises methodological questions regarding the collection, analysis, and generalizability of data. Slightly different from the three previous legacies and their corresponding approaches (the process, models, and effects of parental involvement), the last legacy leads us to consider the process of conducting studies of parent involvement.

Implications of the Literature

The stormy history of parent-school relations has left us legacies that have molded the context for parent-school interactions. The same heritage that has made the practice of parent involvement so complex has also made research in the area problematic, lacking clear definition and sustained commitment and characterized by a multiplicity of goals. The common challenges that bind researchers and practitioners frame the discussion of current research issues.

Studies in the field of parent involvement span the disciplines of history, anthropology, education, psychology, sociology, business and political science. The intensity of interest by each discipline is not the same overall, nor is it constant over time. For example, in the mid-Sixties a great deal of the material written about parent involvement emerged from the disciplines of political science, sociology and social psychology. More recently, with the emphasis on the relationship between parent involvement and educational attainment, there is widespread interest by educators and cognitive psychologists. In fact, only beginning in 1982 did Psychological Abstracts give parent-school relations its own heading. Because of the breadth of the disciplines involved, this brief review of findings cannot be all-inclusive. Rather, reviewing a limited number of representative studies, I will try to provide a glimpse into the actual research while focusing on current approaches and dilemmas.

I. Studies About the Process of Parent Involvement

Because in the past schools and families have been very much separate entities, there is a good deal of interest in how-to forge effective links between them. This process research falls into two general categories: (1) practical and descriptive case studies, and (2) empirical research assessing determinants of parent involvement or who is involved, under what conditions.

In the practical and descriptive category are a multitude of handbooks and articles written by academics, teachers, principals, reading supervisors and even state department of education personnel. In 1980, for example, the Indiana State Department of Public Instruction published Parents-Schools: A Good Relationship. An instructional guide, this volume offers a rationale for parents taking a role in their child's education and gives practical advice on how this can be done. Parent Involvement in the Schools: A State of the Art Report, (Sowers, Lang, & Gowett, 1980) provides a good review of parent involvement programs and strategies. Schools, too, receive information on what they can do to facilitate the parent-school partnership. Mary Snow, in an excellent 1982 report, surveyed schools to find out if and how they were meeting the needs of "special families" -- low-income families, and single parents. Such descriptive analyses synthesize information and serve as guides for school personnel.

The second kind of "process" study is usually written for academic audiences and focuses on discovering determinants of parent involvement. Typically, these pieces look at home and school settings to determine precisely which variables are associated with high levels of parent involvement. For example, in their unpublished work, Endahl, Cline and McBee looked at Head Start centers and ferreted out which characteristics of the family (e.g., socio-economic status, parental attitudes or home environment) were related to parent involvement. They found that parents who fostered a stimulating home environment where education is valued were also more involved in schools. In basically the same type of study, Wimpelberg (1982) found that parents with higher educations and higher expectations, and parents with special needs children, either more or less abled, had the most frequent and productive contact with their child's teacher.

Finally, teacher variables are often investigated. The Henry Becker/Joyce Epstein team at Johns Hopkins and the David Williams/John Stallworth team at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory are two such examples. One Becker and Epstein (1982) study found that while teachers had positive views toward parents working with their own children in the home, variables including student grade level, classroom racial composition, teacher graduate training, and school district policies had strong independent effects on a teachers' practice of parent involvement. Interestingly, in studying different types of parent involvement, Williams and Stallworth (1982) found that while teachers and principals supported parents helping their children with homework or tutoring, they were not enthusiastic about parent involvement in curriculum development, instruction or school governance. In fact, some teachers indicated they were uncomfortable with parents in their classrooms.

This mode of inquiry with its focus on discerning determinants of parent involvement is particularly helpful to practitioners because it yields findings about specific variables and their relationship to the process of involving parents in their children's academic life, both in the home and in school. For example, recommendations for practice emanating from the Williams and Stallworth piece (1982) indicate that there is a need for parent involvement training for teachers. More specifically the study's results suggest that training might be most appropriately focused on: 1) helping parents work at home with their children on training activities, and 2) guiding parents to participate in school activities that support the educational program (p. 12). Process research like the Williams and Stallworth piece often provides the empirical data that help to refine specific elements in the practice of parent involvement. In contrast, the models approach described below is more helpful in developing a fuller, more comprehensive strategy for involving parents.

II. Models for Parent Involvement

Concurrent with the development of empirical studies, many researchers have attempted to understand parent involvement using a more holistic approach. A number of people, interested in trying to make sense of parent-school relations, have sought to chronicle events and to codify them

into models. These models provide examples of successful programs that could be consulted or replicated. By definition, models research, in contrast to empirical research, does not explore individual variables or traits per se, but delves into the character, the deeply imbedded traditions and the daily forces that create patterns of involvement.

Because models help the practitioner interpret his or her reality in new ways, it is not at all surprising that some model-builders are researchers with a heavy interest in practice. Comer (1980), for example, has developed a model that predicts a hierarchy of involvement. Useful to practitioners, Comer's model differentiates roles for parents, creates options for their involvement, and predicts realistic percentages of involvement at each level in the hierarchy.

Other models express a heuristic view of parent involvement, considering the development of parents' participatory skills. Arnstein (1971) differentiates levels in citizen participation, ranging from non-participation to citizen control. Adams' (1976) construct includes a hierarchy ranging from parents as decisionmakers to parents as teachers of their own children.

Perhaps the most comprehensive overview of different types of models was prepared by Gotts (1979) who developed principles of classification: first, according to the roles parents play; second, distinguishing between parent involvement programs that are preventive versus ameliorative in orientation; third, sifting models according to their comprehensiveness; and fourth, classifying models as to whether they view clients as autonomous and resourceful or helpless and victimized.

Stated simply, the models provide angles or lenses through which parent involvement can be viewed. But in the hands of skilled practitioners, these models, constructed largely from ethnographic research, can be extremely useful in helping to define program goals, to establish priorities, and to determine day-to-day operations. Three final points about models: first, they are the most well-understood and most well-used of all the research categories. Second, that there are so many models verifies the complexity of the practice of parent involvement. Third, no one model is predictive under a full range of circumstances. As such, they remain guides, not rule books, for practice.

III. Studies of the Effects of Parent Involvement

By far, the greatest amount of research has investigated the effects of parent involvement. Because of ambiguity in the purpose of parent involvement, multiple goals for parent involvement programs have emerged -- each with its own accompanying body of effects research. In assessing the multiple goals, six have predominated and consequently have been the focus of much parent involvement research. The goals are:

- to contribute to the student's cognitive performance
- to contribute to the student's social and emotional well-being
- to enrich the school program and the climate for learning
- to encourage the growth and development of parents
- to encourage the growth and development of teachers
- to serve as a link with the larger community, thereby stimulating public interest in education.

A. Effect on Cognitive Development

Of the six areas into which the effects research is divided, more research has been conducted to assess cognitive gains and academic impact than in all other areas put together. In general, the literature reveals a positive correlation between parent involvement and student gain, although the nature of the involvement significantly influences its impact. Iverson, Brownlee, and Walberg (1981) found that parent-teacher contact alone is not a powerful determinant of academic gains for children.

More systematic home-tutoring programs have led to significant reading and math gains. Research suggests that the nature of home tutoring influences its effectiveness. Woods (1974) demonstrated that among the low-income children studied, home tutoring coupled with parent help in the classroom led to greater improvement in test scores than did home-tutoring alone. Della-Piana, et. al. (1968) found that systematic home-based instruction led to reading improvement, especially when the home program

was congruent with school objectives. Reviews of the literature (Barth, 1979) suggest that a well-thought-out home-based program has lasting effects even when its formal components are phased out. Finally, Walberg (1984) postulated a "curriculum of the home" that predicts achievement. It includes parents and children conversing about everyday events, parental encouragement and discussion of leisure-time reading, joint monitoring and analysis of television viewing, and parents expressing affection for their child and interest in his or her academic as well as personal growth.

Another strand of the research has found correlations between various other kinds of parent involvement and school achievement. Mann (1975) cites the 1966 Coleman report linking improved student achievement to as weak a form of participation in governance as membership in the PTA. "Where PTA attendance was reported as being high, children's performance was two to four months ahead of those schools which had no PTA (p.12)." Comparing high and low-achieving students, Rankin (1967) also found high achievement related to greater parent contact with the schools.

Finally, programs which involve parents in <u>all</u> of the above ways have proved effective in improving reading, math and language skills. An example of such a comprehensive program is the Peralta Year-Round School in Oakland, California.[1] The year-round schedule and other policy changes were conceived by parents who were instrumental in developing the program to fit their needs, such as a latchkey program for children of working parents. Parents also participate as classroom volunteers, tutors and guest lecturers and even helped to design new facilities. To enhance parents' ability to help their children at home, a local community college offers courses in subjects related to their children's studies. Aside from the academic gains of students at Peralta Year-Round School, this program has not only staved off the threatened closing of the school, but also made it into a thriving magnet school serving the Oakland area.

B. <u>Non-Cognitive Effects on Children</u>

Less prevalent than research on cognitive effects, studies of the effects of parent involvement on children's attitudes toward school and behavior in school are emerging. Thomas (1980), and Duncan and Fitzgerald (1969) have demonstrated correlations between parent involvement and improved attendance, a reduction in suspension rates for disciplinary

reasons and an improved attitude toward homework. The latter is particularly striking in light of Coleman's data that reveal American high school students today spend an average of four hours weekly on homework as opposed to 30 watching television. Parent involvement, while not a panacea, can certainly work as one effective tool in improving student attitudes that are associated with learning.

C. Effect on the School Program and the Climate for Learning

A number of scholars and researchers are focusing attention on the relationship between parent involvement, and school program and climate. Not surprisingly, Gordon (1979) found that the more parents participated in multiple parent involvement activities, the more likely the quality of the school environment would be improved. Case studies, such as Foster and Back's (1974) description of the ways in which parent participation transformed the Roosevelt School, as well as those described in Don Davies' (1976) Schools Where Parents Make a Difference, indicate that staff morale as well as school climate are positively swayed by parent participation.

The link between "improved school climate" and improved academic performance has also been demonstrated. McDill, Rigsby, and Meyers, as early as 1969, investigated the relationships between parent involvement and school social climate on student academic performance. They found that "parental and community interest in quality education are critical factors in explaining the impact of the high school environment and education aspiration of students" (p. 27). In a program at the Martin Luther King School in New Haven, James Comer (1980) also found that changes in school climate were related to accelerated academic achievemet. Comer's belief is that when parents become involved in school life by volunteering in school, the climate changes, and ultimately the test scores of the entire school, not just the scores of the chidren whose parents participate, increase. His findings also suggest the importance of a fundamental feeling of "ownership" in the school, not only among administrators and teachers, but among parents and students as well.

The relationship between positive climate (one that is open, responsive, supportive, and sets expectations for learning) and community is still under exploration. While the community education and school effectiveness literatures are exploring variables in this area, continued

emphasis needs to be placed on teasing out precise correlates of "positive school climate." Further, the reciprocity between communities that support their schools, and schools that positively affect communities warrants exploration.

D. Effects on Parents

Many benefits of school participation for parents themselves have been cited in the literature. These benefits include attitudinal change, improved economic status and political participation.

Lopate, Flaxman, Bynum, and Gordon (1969) reported that parent involvement in school affairs is positively correlated with parents' evaluations of the importance of education and their attitudes toward the school as an institution. Heavily-involved parents consistently agreed with statements such as "Getting ahead means obtaining or providing a good education," and "Education is the first or second biggest problem in the community."

Furthermore, programs initially designed to involve parents in their children's education can be the impetus for parents to take a new hold on their own lives. For instance, at Tuxedo School in Birmingham, Alabama,[2] parents of low-performing children were invited to participate in an in-school program to improve their children's reading. This prompted parents who themselves had difficulty in reading to seek help. Out of the resulting reading groups grew parent support and training sessions geared towards career counselling and job placement. In a formal study of another group of parents, Adams (1976) found that all parents who had participated on a Head Start policymaking council reported personal change as a result of their participation. The most dramatic changes (from being on welfare to being off welfare) were reported by those most intensely involved. Davies (1978) suggests that jobs and job advancement are among the most tangible benefits of involvement. Skills learned through participation in school life may lead parents to jobs elsewhere.

The effects literature also indicates that another related benefit of participation may be entrance into electoral politics. Davies (1978) notes that while the PTA and League of Women Voters have been traditional political training grounds for mainstream parents, participation in such programs as Head Start offers similar opportunities to poor parents. In

sum, parents' attitudes change as does their sense of self-worth and their employability as a result of their participation. Unfortunately, this benefit of parent-school collaboration is both understudied and underreported.

E. Effects on Teachers

Compared to parent effects, there is much less research on parent involvement as it impacts teachers. We do know that teachers differ significantly in their attitudes toward parent involvement, generally favoring a circumscribed role for parents. Yet reports indicate that in schools where there is a strong parent involvement component, teachers are happier and requests for teacher transfers are reduced (Thomas, 1980). Given the benefits for parents and school climate, it would be disappointing if parent participation did not provide commensurate advantages for teachers -- especially since teachers play such a large part in encouraging and sustaining parent involvement. Clearly, the dearth of research in this area should not be taken to reflect the absence of positive impact on teachers. Rather, it points up the need for further exploration.

F. Effects on Community

The sixth goal of parent involvement has stimulated only limited empirical research, but what has been done has yielded encouraging data. In February 1984, Phi Delta Kappan, a leading educational journal, focused its entire issue on "Building Links Between Communities and Schools," underscoring the increasing salience of the topic. Partnerships are emerging between schools and businesses with the aim of improving educational quality and deepening the private sector's awareness of current educational issues. While not a panacea, as Seeley points out (1984), partnerships do have the potential to positively effect not only schools but the community as a whole. Unfortunately, while there are profiles of successful efforts, to date there are few empirical data that actually assess the impact of these infant partnerships on communities. However, more than a decade ago, empirical research conducted in the Head Start program showed that in communities where there was active participation in the program by parents, Head Start was more able to positively impact local

community institutions. (National Survey, 1970).

In summary, there is a large body of research which suggests that parent involvement can change attitudes and improve achievement, particularly if the parent involvement is comprehensive and long-lasting, and if it is begun at an early age. It seems that the particular form of parent involvement is not so critical as long as it is well-planned. Programs which involve some kind of home instruction do, however, seem to accelerate cognitive gains, particularly in young children. But for the most part, correlation studies of school-based parent involvement and achievement are not sufficiently precise to determine the mechanism by which achievement is influenced. The differential effects of race and socioeconomic status necessitate further study to discern for whom and under what conditions certain types of parent involvement are most effective.

IV. Methodological Concerns

This paper began with a brief history of parent-school relations and suggested that history has left us four legacies, each of which has influenced not only the practice of parent involvement, but its research. First, it was suggested that the legacy of separatism led to extensive research to discern the process by which schools and parents interact. Second, disequilibrium of the asymmetric relationship between parents and schools, with schools holding the power, has necessitated that various models be developed to understand how parents and schools can come together effectively. Third, that the purpose of parent-school interactions has remained ambiguous has led to a diverse set of goals for parent involvement. Asking why our knowledge is so very limited leads us to the fourth legacy, that of schools' individuality.

That parent involvement is so unique from school to school has caused serious researchers great concern and has made systematic evaluation problematic. First, because programs are tailored to local needs, conducting cross-site, or cross-district research is difficult. What may appear to be a high level of involvement in one area may be low in another. Beyond geographic variation, there is little consistency of parent involvement programs over time. Parent involvement is a plastic process.

People build programs for today's needs, only to modify them for tomorrow's. This constant flux makes longitudinal research difficult: a program component here today may be gone tomorrow. Irregular funding patterns for both the programs and the research add to this inconsistency. Launching an evaluation of a program that might not exist in six months takes a good deal of bravery on the part of the researcher, particularly if he or she hopes to build a career pursuing this line of inquiry. Witness the small handful of researchers in this country who are or have conducted series of studies on parent involvement. For the most part, parent involvement research is done in bits and pieces by different scholars. It is not unusual to see a thoughtful dissertation on parent involvement by a promising scholar whose subsequent work is not at all related to the topic.

Further, there is no sense of community among scholars in the field. Researchers interested in parent involvement tend to come from different disciplines. While this makes the work more interesting, researchers working in the area tend to be isolated from one another, and from others in their own disciplines. A piecemeal aproach to research is further exacerbated because the cadre of workers is small and disjointed, and because the research produced is not cumulative. Studies tend to be conducted independently and typically do not build on knowledge garnered from preceding work. Further, there is no systematic vehicle, such as a scholarly journal, for researchers to share, discuss, and critique one another's findings.

A final and critical concern is the emphasis on producing quantitative studies. Their dominance is particularly interesting in a field that is so ripe for well-articulated ethnographic efforts. Given that the ecological perspective is so fundamental to parent involvement, it is surprising, and upsetting, that so many academics still prefer to conduct studies that look at isolated elements -- perhaps this is a response to the plethora of program designs and goals that exist. This focus on individual elements of participation may also be a statement on the methodological state of the art. For example, when one wonders why there are so many studies on cognitive effects, it could be that well-defined measurements to assess children's reading and math performance exist while non-cognitive and socio-emotional measures still need refinement. Or it may be that academic success is thought by many to be education's real bottom line!

Whatever the reason, the lack of an ecological perspective marks one of the ways in which research has not kept pace with the practice of parent involvement. In fact, today's programs are ecological in approach. They recognize that helping children means working with families and communities, establishing services for parents, as well as children. The Peralta Year-Round School is a case in point. Parent involvement there is predicated on giving parents an active voice in the administration of the school so that the school becomes responsive to their needs. It also involves accessing community resources for parents so that they will be better able to guide their children. Parent involvement in the 1980's is becoming characterized by a new give-and-take, one brought about by the elimination of the Federal mandates of the 1960's. In the 1980's, schools face no mandate to bring parents into the schools and parents must be highly motivated to enter. In so doing, they are reforming the relationship between themselves, schools and communities.

Research in the area will need to consider the effects of such collaboration not only on children's academic performance, but also on the quality of life of all family members, on the climate of the school and on the ecosystem of the community.

Implications for Practice and Policy

A fragmented research milieu has implications not only for the work being carried out, but for policy as well. Turning to other domains, we see routinely that research has influenced policy for low-income children, for the handicapped and for support of the Women, Infants and Children nutrition program. Each of these efforts was nurtured by the collective vision of practitioners, advocates and researchers. Effective and timely use of research can convert yesterday's well-intentioned, but fledgling program into tomorrow's lighthouse effort.

Yet in the field of parent involvement research there is little impact on policy, and unfortunately, even less vision regarding the important relationship that must exist between research and policy. With the number of studies being carried out today, even given their methodological problems, some principles of parent involvement should be emerging --

principles that can guide the formation of policy. With the exception of limited pieces of work, little thought has been given to promoting a long-range research agenda with an eye toward propelling parent involvement to a place on the national agenda or to developing public policies in this area. At a minimum, a regular research forum, perhaps an annual conference -- where researchers could come together to share what they know, what they don't know, and what they need to know to develop a body of research -- should be established. Beyond that, a cumulative research agenda that considers policy issues should be formulated.

Second, individuals committed to parent-school collaboration must understand the reciprocity inherent in the scholar-practitioner diad. Like families and schools themselves, these two domains are interdependent. Without research to verify the efficacy of and to guide the practitioner's work, there will be no innovation, and without practitioners to fuel the thought and prod the minds of academics, there would be little research of value. Consequently, a first step toward ensuring support (both emotional and financial) should provide that no program be conducted in the absence of evaluation and no research conducted without an eye toward program improvement. As a second step, researchers should reach beyond their own studies to help create a receptive climate for the advancement of knowledge and policy in this field. Those interested in promoting parent involvement research need to come together and project their collective vision toward creating a field committed to learning from and sharing its findings.

Allow me to return momentarily to Debbie, our little friend who figured out that there are 52 weeks in a year. The way Debbie got to her answer was a bit messed up -- a bit like the field of parent involvement research -- but with guts, unique logic and hard thought, Debbie got there. With that same determination, we too should be able to gain the respect and support that parent involvement research so rightly deserves. Where else should parent involvement research be more important than in America, a democracy built upon the strength of the family and the educational system?

Notes

[1]More information about the Peralta-Year Round School, can be obtained from the school at 460 63rd Street, Oakland, California, 94609, (414) 652-6344, Caroline Middleton, Program Director; or see "Programs to Strengthen Families: A Resource Guide," edited by the Yale Bush Center in Child Development & Social Policy and the Family Resource Coalition (available from Family Resource Coalition, 230 North Michigan Avenue, Suite 1625, Chicago, Illinois 60601, (312) 726-4750).

[2]More information about the Tuxedo School can be obtained from the school at 2009 Avenue Q., Birmingham, Alabama 35218, (205) 789-4411, Mr. Eddie Dansby, Jr., Principal.

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